A FULL AND FAITHFUL LIFE
3. LOOKING AROUND… NOT WORRYING
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Psalm 95:1-7a
Romans 5:1-11
Matthew 6:25-36

"…do not worry about your life…Look at the birds… consider the lilies."
Matthew 6:25,26.28 (NRSV)

There is so much to worry about this morning: concerns we share, and concerns that are ours alone. Settle us down. Silence is us any voice but your own, and in the silence, startle us, once again with a love that is around us and in us and that will never let us go, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Every day, day in and day out, you and I are exposed to 3,500 commercial messages: on television, radio, in the pages of the newspaper we read in the morning and sometimes wrapped around it so ingeniously that you can't even get to the news without first encountering it, in shop windows whenever we pass on the way to work, on the sides of buses, on top of taxis, on the pages of the magazines we leaf through before dinner, at the theatre before the motion picture starts, courtside at United Center, on the outfield wall at the ball park – Wrigley Field, so far, at least, limited to one or two, behind home plate so that you get one with every pitch, overhead at Oak Street Beach behind a Piper Cub. 3,500 times a day, a message that says you do not have enough. What you have is not enough. You need to work harder, earn more, so that you can spend more and have more. [Donald McCullough, Say Please, Say Thank You p.19]

3,500 times a day. And so, shopping has become the number one leisure activity for Americans. Young people hang out, socialize, and roam in packs at shopping malls. You can even have a shopping vacation, complete with a tour director so you don't waste time.

We live in a consumer culture. Materialism is what makes this economy go. Sociologist C. Wright Mills taught fifty years ago that once an economy provided for basic human needs: food, shelter and clothing, it must either discover or create new needs if that economy is to thrive and grow. We have become masterful at that. My needs include items or services that were my parent's ideas of complete luxury and weren't even in my grandparents' wildest fantasies. An automobile whose seats adjust, whose temperature is always comfortable, even with a woman's voice telling me to turn right or left (if I could figure out how it works!), DVD, iPhone, a microwave that cooks my egg in 37 seconds and my bacon in 15.

You didn't have to come to church this morning to hear that we live in a consumer culture, that materialism is the robust ideology that drives our economy, and that we have a lot of stuff no one before us had. And I don't think you need to hear another pulpit broadside aimed at the seductive sin of materialism. Besides, I confess, I enjoy the products of our culture as much as anyone. I love my car, my microwave, my iPhone, mostly until it rings in church.

So what is the issue here? The issue is that you and I are here this morning in the name of one who said, "Do not worry about what you will eat, or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them… Consider the lilies of the field… Therefore, do not worry…"

Now, you can follow that teaching by radically downsizing, selling everything you own, throwing yourself on the generosity of others and living off the land without a care in the world. Or you can join a monastery, or a counter-culture movement committed to living as simply as possible, owning nothing personal, sharing and holding everything in common. Those alternatives are not for everyone. If they are not for you, as they are not for me I concluded a long time ago, then the issue becomes how are we to live honestly and faithfully within our consumer, materialistic culture.

We've been working our way through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: his moral and ethical teachings about living a full and faithful life. We've thought about the practices that define and mark one as a Christian, the things Christians do to follow him in the world. We've considered the values he taught: compassion, justice, humility, peacemaking and practices

such as alms giving, care for the hungry and homeless, fasting, praying and forgiving.

We come this morning to a much loved part of the Sermon on the Mount – not worrying, considering the birds and flowers.

“Jesus unsettles us,” Jason Bayasee says in a theological commentary on this passage. (Feasting on the Word] And, I confess, these words of Jesus irritated me when I first started seriously considering and working on them. That is the burden of the preacher. You can, of course, simply ignore the difficult, demanding and sometimes perplexing teachings of Jesus like these; or you can dig in and wrestle with them, argue with them. At the time I first had to do it, we had small children at home and an income that would have qualified us for food stamps had there been food stamps, which there weren’t. The house was provided but the fire pot in the furnace was cracked so when the heat was on it smelled like an oil refinery. The back yard flooded when it rained and the toilets didn’t work. We had no health insurance yet, but there were runny noses and fevers and prescriptions for which there was no budget. It is fair to say that we did a lot of worrying about food and clothing and about the health and security of our children. So my first response when this passage came up in the lectionary was irritation. “Don’t worry about your life?” You must be kidding. Is Jesus totally out of touch? Is he just naïve? I love something Anne Lamott said somewhere on the topic, “I’ve had times in my life when I had money, and times when I had no money. Having is a lot better.”

So let’s think about this. “Look at the birds,” he said. “They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” Well, yes, look at the birds. They are very busy all day long. In fact, there is nothing more obsessively busy, nor harder working, than two robins constructing a nest, flying back and forth all day long with twigs, and leaves, and pieces of string. And when the eggs hatch, working all day long to feed their young. I love to look at the birds at the feeder. As far as I can see there are no breaks, no loafing in a bird’s life: there are moments of sheer beauty at the end of the day, at dusk, and then there is a time of beautiful singing. They may not have the capacity to worry about tomorrow but they work all day to be ready for it.

Based on my modest observations I conclude that Jesus was not criticizing hard work, or providing for yourself and those who depend on you. There is no way to know for sure, but he must have done something between the age

of twelve when we last see him in the Jerusalem Temple with his parents, to the day, eighteen years later, when he shows up at the Jordan River to be baptized by his cousin, John, and begins his public ministry. You can't be sure, but I think what he was doing for eighteen years was working, in his father Joseph's carpenter shop, learning the trade as an apprentice. Joseph must have died while Jesus was young because he is never mentioned again. So, I like to think that Jesus, the oldest son, inherited the business of the shop and managed it for eighteen years: kept the books, took orders, sold his products, dealt with customers, ordered materials, incurred debt, and worked all day long at the carpenter's bench, making tables, door frames, stools, bowls. Some scholars translate the word "builder," not carpenter. So maybe Jesus dug foundations, made bricks, built walls, knew how to support a mud roof, square a window frame – to provide food and clothing and shelter for his mother and younger brothers and sisters. There is no way to know, of course, but maybe, after he began his ministry in Galilee, he returned to the Nazareth Carpentry Shop to help his younger brothers finish a job.

So I conclude that he is not suggesting that his followers won't work hard, and provide for themselves and those who depend on them.

"Consider the lilies, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you, Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." True enough, but not terribly helpful when your child is hungry and shivering in the cold because you can't afford a coat. Karl Marx, by the way, hated these words of Jesus. They were exactly what he meant when he called religion the "opiate of the masses." "Consider the lilies? They are just goat food , nothing more." Marx said.

There is, after all, a lot to worry about this morning. I begin the day by checking the news and start to worry immediately: a potential uncontrolled nuclear meltdown in the earthquake and tsunami damaged nuclear power plants in Japan, radiation in the ocean water, American military action in Libya and the threat of another war, chaos and fighting in Afghanistan, car bombs in Iraq, anti-Americanism in our most important ally in the region, Pakistan, Palestinian rockets fired into Israel, Israeli response killing civilians and children, oil prices, the volatile stock market… you could be in a full blown depression before the sun comes up most mornings.

I don't think it is possible to live fully in the world with your eyes and ears open and not worry – a lot, so what did he mean?

Some scholars suggest that “anxious” is closer to what Jesus meant than “worry”. Anxiety seems more to the point, anxiety as a powerful unfocused fear that underlies and expands and exaggerates the thousand and one things we worry about. It is a powerful psychological, political and economic dynamic.

Sometime in the past fifty years, normal human worrying became deeper, more profound, became, that is to say, anxiety. The psychologists noticed it and began to probe, but before them artists, writers, poets. It had to do with the birth of the atomic age, the unprecedented power to destroy the world and everything in it. W.H. Auden wrote a famous poem in 1947, two years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki: “The Age of Anxiety”

> We move on
> As the world wills, the rise and fall
> In pay and prices…
> … the stupid world where
> Gadgets are gods, and we go on talking
> Many about much, but remain alone.
> Alive but alone, belonging where?

Rollo May, a leading psychologist of the day, wrote a book everybody had to read: The Meaning of Anxiety. Christian theologian, Reinhold Neibuhr, in the defining book of the era, The Nature and Destiny of Man, said that “anxiety – unfocused fear of the unknown, fear of our mortality – as a race, and as individuals… fear of death, is the source of what Christianity means by sin.”

Unresolved anxiety causes us to turn to whatever we believe will protect and secure us: an ever growing defense budget, an automatic weapon in every home, and of course, insurance policies, investments, money, stuff. It is the theme addressed powerfully in Tennessee Williams’ great drama “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.” I found myself thinking about that play, and the movie with the death of Elizabeth Taylor who played the role of “Maggie, the Cat” in the motion picture.

It’s a story of a southern family and its patriarch, Big Daddy, played by Burl Ives. He is the epitome of the American Dream, has worked his way up from field hand to supervisor to part owner to sole owner and manager of a vast cotton plantation. He is fabulously rich, enjoys being rich, is

completely successful financially, and personally, relationally, a disaster, a complete failure.

In an unforgettable scene, a scene that I think is the best – commentary on Jesus' words in Matthew 6, Big Daddy and his son, Brick (Paul Newman), are in the basement of the big plantation house trying, desperately, to communicate. Big Daddy is dying. Brick was a high school football star, but hasn't done much since, is bitter and cynical, unhappily married to Maggie, and drinks all day and all night.

The basement where the conversation takes place is absolutely cluttered floor to ceiling with items purchased long ago and no longer used or even cared about.

"Will you look at this stuff?" Brick says.

"Bought most of it," Big Daddy explains, "when I took your mother to Europe on that tour… That Europe is nothing but a great big auction. Bunch of worn-out places. It's just a big fire sale. Big Mama went wild in it. She just bought and bought… She was lucky I'm a rich man."

"Why did you let Ma buy all this stuff?" Brick asks.

Big Daddy responds: "The human animal is a beast that eventually has to die. If he's got money, he buys and buys. The reason he buys everything he can, is because… of a crazy hope that one of the things he buys will be life-everlasting."

The talk turns awkwardly to the frayed and unsatisfactory relationship between father and son.

"I've noticed you don't call me Big Daddy anymore. If you needed someone to lean on… Why not me? I'm your father. You should've come to those who love you."

"You don't know what love is," Brick says and Big Daddy answers –

"What did you want that I didn't buy? Who do you think I bought it for? It's yours, the place, the money."

His son answers –

“I don’t want this.” And Brick begins to cry: “Can’t you understand? I never wanted your place or money… All I wanted was a father – I wanted you to love me.”

So maybe the lesson here is to worry about things worth worrying about: things so precious you couldn’t begin to put a monetary value on them. Your relationships, for instance, those you deeply and dearly love, those you need and who need you.

Worry about the world, the future: be concerned about the environment and sustainable agriculture, be concerned about the life of the city, the quality of life for the poor, marginal. Be concerned about peace in the world.

But when you start obsessing about things like food and whether you have the right attire and whether your child will get into the college of his choice, or in Chicago – the high school – whenever you find your stress level escalating about things that do not matter in an ultimate sense – Jesus said take a big breath and go outside and look around.

In her fine book about Christian practices, An Altar in the World, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “The easiest practice… I know is to simply sit down somewhere outside, preferably near a body of water, and pay attention for at least twenty minutes. It is not necessary to take on the whole world at first. Just take the three square feet you are sitting on and pay attention. You may even feel the beating of your heart, that miracle of ingenuity that does its work with no thought or instruction from you.” [p.22,23]

And Mary Oliver whose poems always remind me to slow down and look around and consider the miracles of grace and love and wonder all around us. She writes about a howling winter storm, and a row of ducks on the beach of the lake standing so close together facing into the wind they look like a feathered hedge. And their tails, a small roof under which crouch smaller birds for shelter.

> “If someone you didn’t know
> told you this,
> as I am telling you this,
> would you believe it?

Belief isn't always easy
But this much I have learned –
if not enough else –
to live with my eyes open."
Thirst: Poems by Mary Oliver "In the Storm"

"Look at the birds… consider the lilies," Jesus said. He wants his disciples, wants you and me to know, that when the chips are down, when we face real crisis: when a dear one is critically ill, when we are ill, when a dear one dies, when we lose a job, a relationship, a child, we are not abandoned, alone, without resource or help. Jesus wants disciples to live with confidence that God will provide the resources they need to live: courage and hope and strength and security and love, above all else, love.

I don't want or need your money, the son says to his father. I want your love.

It's about your center, your heart, your soul, where there is a place deep inside you for God, and if God is not there, something else is: something you are trying to trust and depend on: success, influence, wealth, status.

The invitation is to ponder that, consider it and to invite into that place, that place deep inside, where you are most who you are and always will be – to invite into that place the one who loves you and will never let you go and who is your ultimate safety, your security, your salvation… Jesus Christ – All praise to him.